46% of honey on the European market is suspected of being adulterated

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EU investigation finds that 46% of honey on the European market is suspected of being adulterated

EU Coordinated Action “From the hives”: Sampling, investigations and results

Update

After complaints from associations of honey producers and consumers, the EU has investigated potential fraud in honey sold on the EU market. Of 320 samples taken at EU borders, 147 (46%) were suspected of being non-compliant with the provisions of the EU Honey Directive.

Impacted products

honey

What is changing?

About 40% of honey on the EU market is imported from outside the European Union.

Following complaints from producers and consumer associations about suspected frauds in the sector, the EU launched a coordinated action to check the state of play.

320 consignments were sampled in 16 Member States, plus Norway and Switzerland, between November 2021 and February 2022.

The action has confirmed that a significant part of the honey imported from non-EU countries and placed on the EU market is suspected of not complying with the provisions of the EU Honey Directive 2001/110/EC, and remains undetected.

The main frauds involve the addition of syrups (mostly made from rice, wheat or sugar beet), and the labelling of honey's true origin.

Profiles of exporting and importing countries are shown in the Figures below.

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The report highlights that there are no consumer health concerns. The issue is with false information being displayed, non-conformity with EU rules, and prices. As a consequence, the EU intends to:

- remind importing operators within the EU of their obligations to put on the market food that complies with EU rules
- increase controls at EU borders
- reinforce import requirements by introducing a new paragraph in the public health attestation in the certificate (Model HON), Regulation 2022/36
- ask the exporting countries concerned to conduct investigations in their own country and penalise confirmed fraud.

Timeline

Report published on 22 March 2023

A proposal to revise the EU Honey Directive is expected soon.

What are the major implications for exporting countries?

The EU will reinforce checks at the border, in particular for honey coming from exporting countries suspected of being non-compliant. Currently there is no obligation to list the establishments authorised to export honey to the EU. The EU may consider adopting such an obligation in the future, as well as detailed labelling of the geographic origin of exported honey.

All the countries concerned in the report will be notified of the results of the EU coordinated action, and asked to conduct investigations and to penalise confirmed frauds appropriately.

Recommended Actions

Operators

Operators in non-EU countries must:

- ensure that food placed on the EU market meets the requirements of the relevant EU and national food laws, and that the honey they are trading complies with EU marketing standards
- verify that such requirements are met (primary responsibility)

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- correctly identify the nature, composition, place or country of origin of honey that they are placing on the EU market.

Competent authorities

Competent authorities in exporting countries should put in place procedures to identify and mitigate any fraud. When signing the official certificates accompanying consignments of honey exported to the EU, competent authorities are guaranteeing compliance with the EU legislation.

Background

The EU legislation aims at preserving the purity of honey as an unprocessed raw agricultural product.

Honey is defined as "the natural sweet substance produced by *Apis mellifera* bees from the nectar of plants or from secretions of living parts of plants or excretions of plant-sucking insects on the living parts of plant, which the bees collect, transform by combining with specific substances of their own, deposit, dehydrate, store and leave in honeycombs to ripen and mature" (Council Directive 2001/110/EC, Annex I: 1).

The Directive also sets out the composition criteria (for human consumption) and associated labelling requirements. These requirements have to be met before honey can be placed on the market in the EU.

Exporting countries must submit a control plan for checking residues and contaminants in honey, and be included in the authorised list (Regulation 2021/405, Annex -I).

They must also guarantee that exported honey is in compliance with EU law by signing the official certificate “HON” accompanying the consignments (Regulation 2020/2235) (see EU official health certificates for exports to the EU explained).

Resources

Online resources from the European Commission:

- EU coordinated action “From the Hives” (Honey 2021-2022)
- From the Hives: Video
- Questions and answers surrounding Honey adulteration
- Food fraud: How genuine is your honey? Press release, Joint Research Centre, 23 March.

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- EU Coordinated action to deter certain fraudulent practices in the honey sector. Technical report, Joint Research Centre.

CBI (2016) What requirements should your product comply with to be allowed on European markets?

COPA-COGECA [direct downloads in 7 languages]:

- Opinion Piece: The existence of European honey will be at stake in the coming months in Brussels
- Press Release: The EU market is flooded with syrup-based “honey”: finally putting a figure on foul play!

Struna, H. (2023) EU ministers relaunch call to improve honey labelling. EURACTIV France, 1 February.

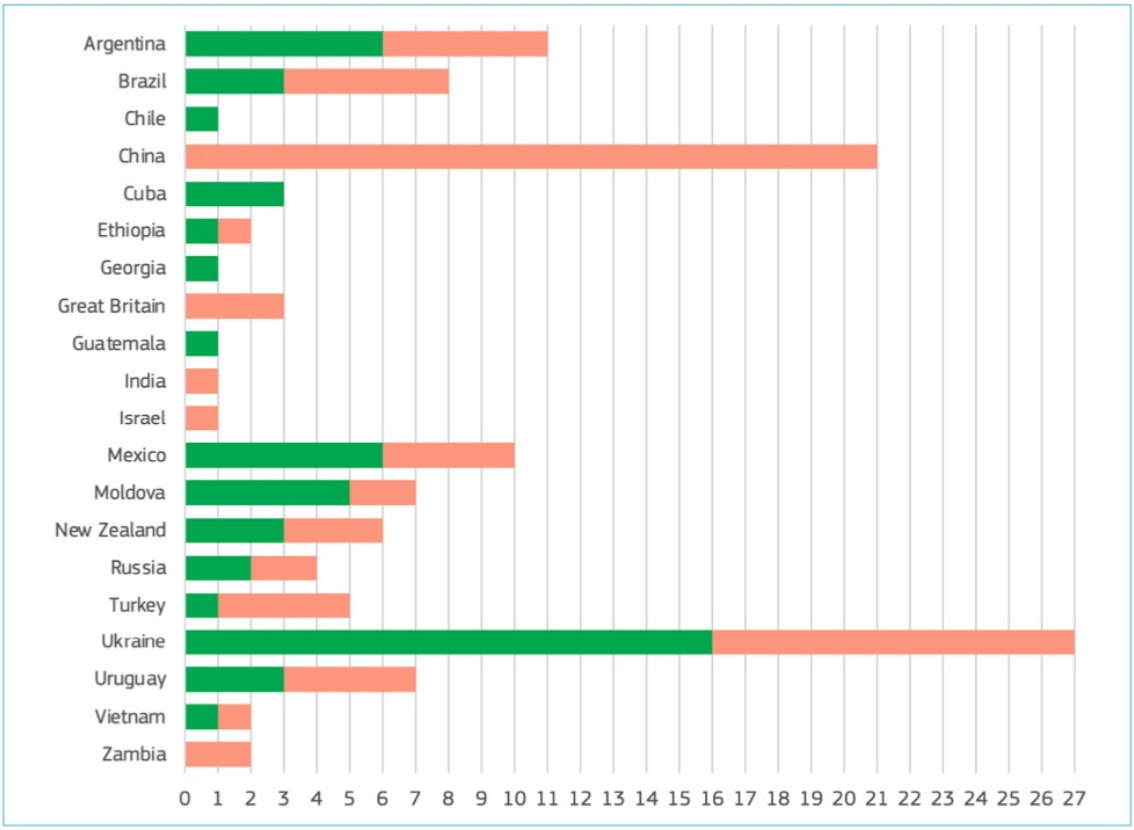
Sources

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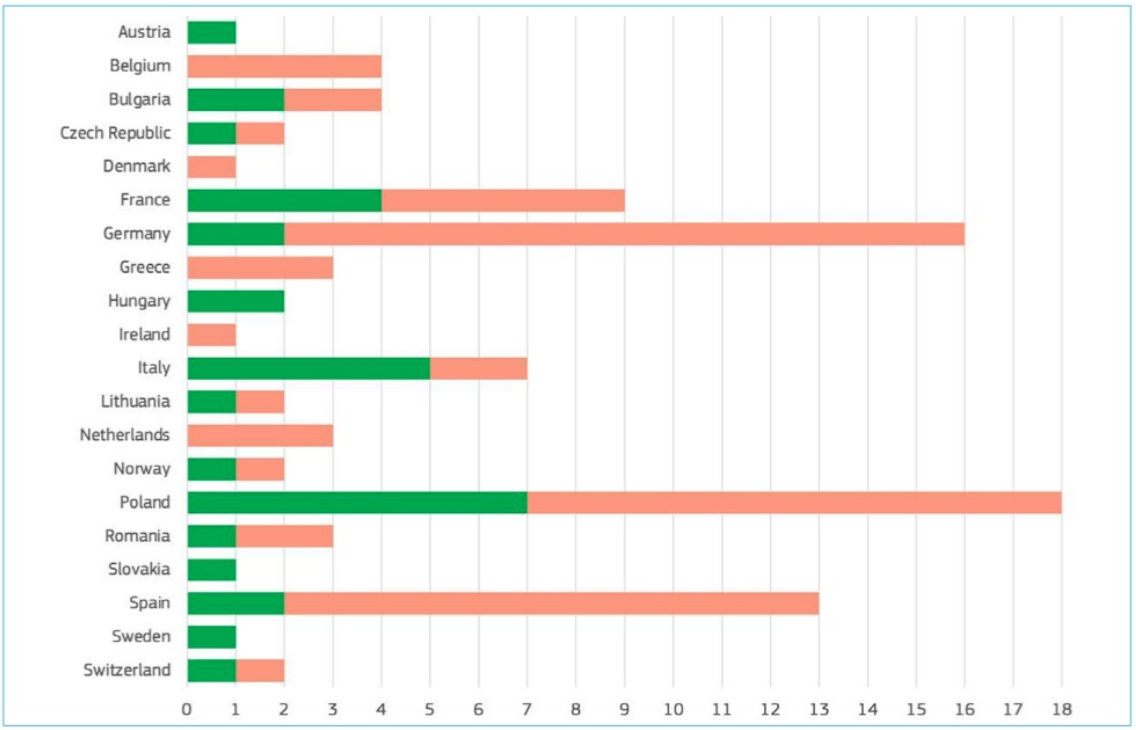
Tables & Figures



Profile of exporters to the EU. Number of operators having exported honey that is – green: compliant with the EU Honey Directive; pink: with at least one sample suspected of non-compliance.

Source: EU Coordinated Action "From the hives", Figure 3

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Profile of EU importers. Number of operators having imported honey that is – green: compliant with the EU Honey Directive; pink: with at least one sample suspected of non-compliance.

Source: EU Coordinated Action "From the hives", Figure 4

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